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SUBJECT: YEMENI PRESIDENT'S VISIT HIGHLIGHTS LONGSTANDING
TIES

Classified By: Pol/C Joseph L. Novak, reasons 1.4 (b+d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's February 28-March 3 visit to Jakarta highlighted the longstanding ties shared by the two countries. Saleh also participated in the World Islamic Economic Forum (WIEF), a gathering of economic leaders from the Muslim world. The visit also cast a spotlight on the small but influential community of Yemeni-descended Indonesians. The visit was politically useful for President Yudhoyono as it helped him cater to this key community ahead of national elections this year. END SUMMARY.

VISIT HIGHLIGHTS BILATERAL COOPERATION

¶2. (U) Yemeni President Saleh visited Indonesia February 28-March 3 as part of a trip that included stops in Syria, Russia, Tajikistan and China. In Jakarta, he met President Yudhoyono and other senior Indonesian officials. Saleh also took part in the March 2-3 World Islamic Economic Forum.

¶3. (U) Saleh and Yudhoyono announced bilateral cooperation in a number of political and economic areas. They discussed law enforcement, counterterrorism and military cooperation. They also agreed to promote greater trade and investment between the two countries and agreed to cooperate on fisheries.

A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP

¶4. (U) Saleh's visit also highlighted longstanding ties shared by the two countries. Yemeni merchants, mostly from the Hadhramaut region of southern Yemen, have plied Indian Ocean trade routes for centuries. Following the Monsoon winds, these traders connected Indonesia with the Arabian Peninsula, Persian Gulf, East African coast and other parts of the Muslim world.

¶5. (U) Yemeni traders had a cultural as well as mercantile function. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Hadhramaut was a key center of Sufism, a mystical and sometimes highly synchronic practice of Islam. Many Hadhrami Sufi sheikhs and scholars settled across Indonesia where they became religious teachers. Many Yemeni migrants claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad, which boosted their religious credentials. While many were concentrated in the Muslim-majority islands of Java and Sumatra, they spread throughout the entire archipelago--and to neighboring countries. For example, Timor-Leste independence leader and former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri traces his ancestry to Yemen.

¶6. (U) Yemeni-descended Indonesians have made important

contributions to their country's history, although it remains a small minority. (Note: Yemeni-descended Indonesians account for a tiny percentage of Indonesia's population of roughly 245 million.) Yemeni-Indonesian merchant families supported the nationalist revolution against Dutch colonial rule. A key figure in the revolution, Abdurrahman Baswedan, is considered one of the founders of the country and served in several government posts early in Indonesia's history. Baswedan's grandson Anies was a key anti-Suharto student leader and is currently the youngest rector of a major Indonesian university.

¶7. (U) The community has also made its mark in diplomacy and scholarship. Ali Alatas, who served as Foreign Minister 1988-1999 and died recently, is a particularly notable example. Alwi Shihab had a distinguished career as an Islamic scholar--including several years teaching in the United States--before serving as Foreign Minister. He now serves as President Yudhoyono's Special Envoy for Middle East Affairs. Shihab's brother Umar is a key leader of the Indonesian Council of Clerics (MUI) and a conservative voice on religious matters.

¶8. (C) Other Yemeni-descended Indonesians have made a less positive impact on the country. Abdullah Sungkar, the deceased co-founder of the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyyah (JI), traces his ancestry to the Hadhramaut. So too does JI's spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir and key terrorist operative Dulmatin (one name only). Some of our contacts, particularly among liberal Muslim groups, blame recent Salafi-influenced Yemeni migrants for spreading extreme religious ideas in Indonesia.

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WORKING A KEY COMMUNITY

¶9. (C) Saleh's visit showed that relations between the two countries are positive. It is not clear whether President Yudhoyono will make a reciprocal visit to Yemen anytime soon. More importantly for Yudhoyono, the visit afforded him the chance to cozy up to Indonesian Yemenis ahead of this year's national elections. The community is wealthy and he could use its donations--and its votes.

HUME